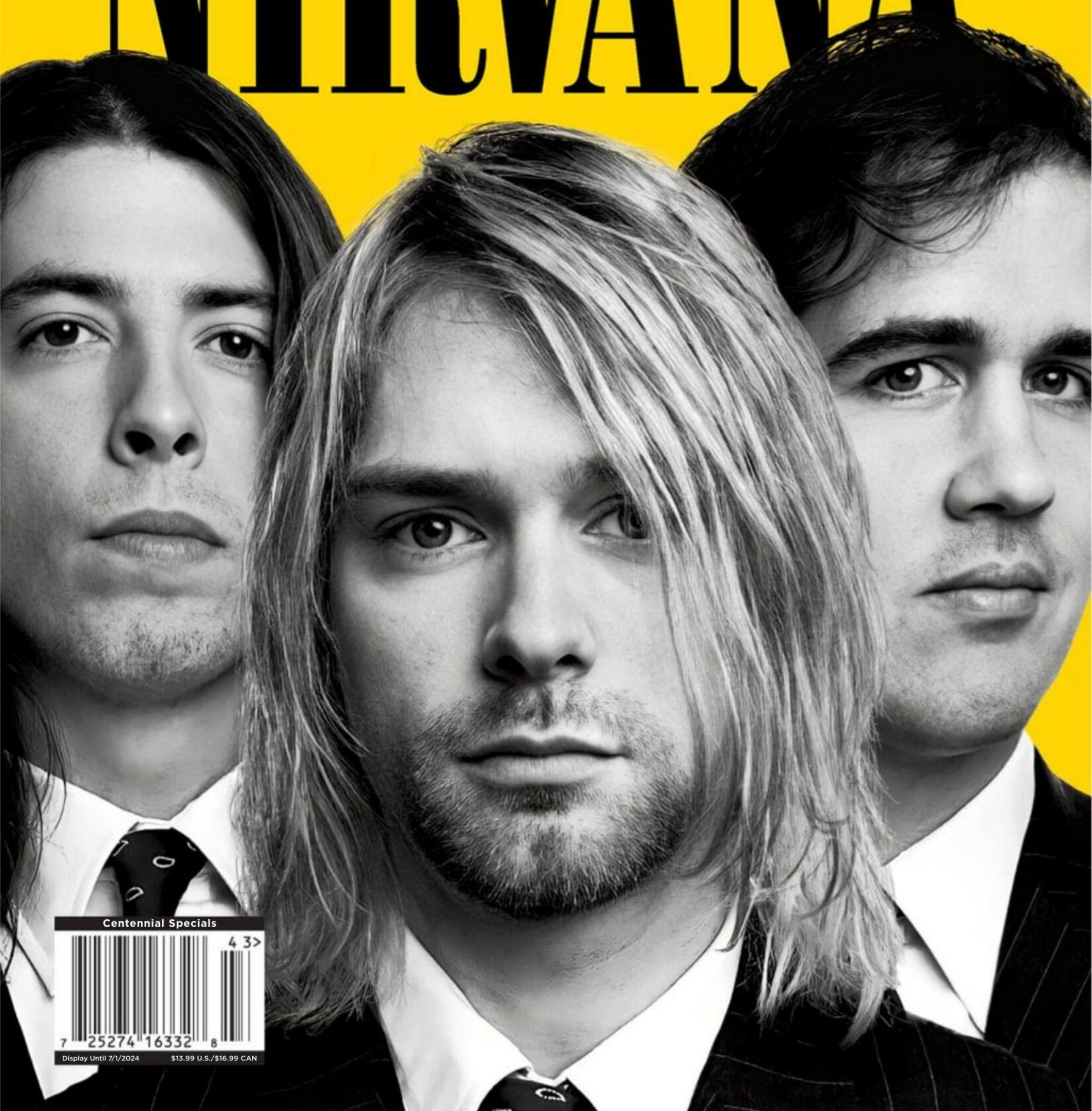
THE MUSIC THE MEANING THE LEGACY

THE STORY OF NIRVANA



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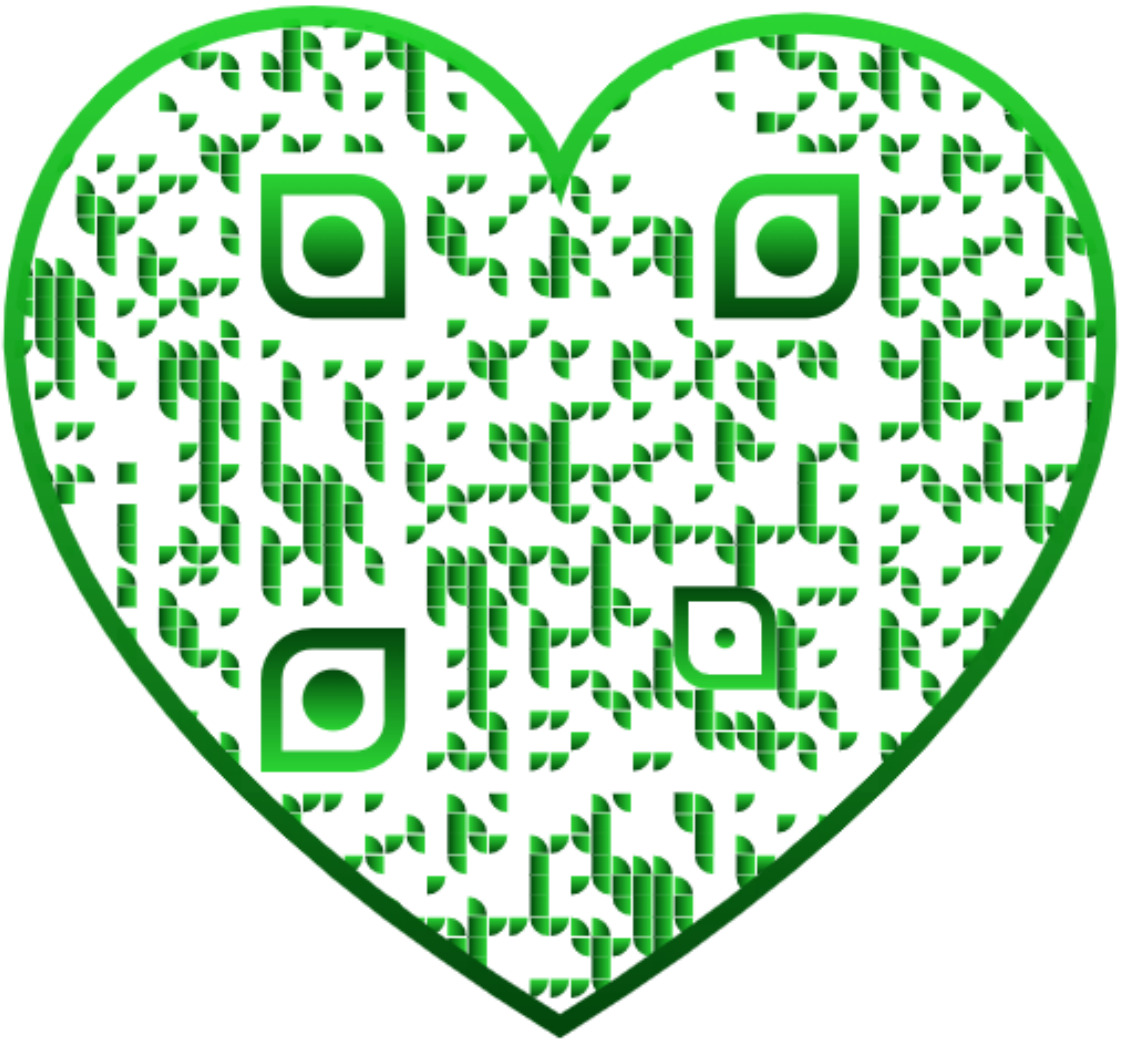

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Nirvana, circa 1990: (from left) Kurt Cobain, Dave Grohl, Krist Novoselic.

INTRODUCTION

RELUCTANT HEROES

Nirvana's conflicted complexity reflected the feelings and emotions of Gen X

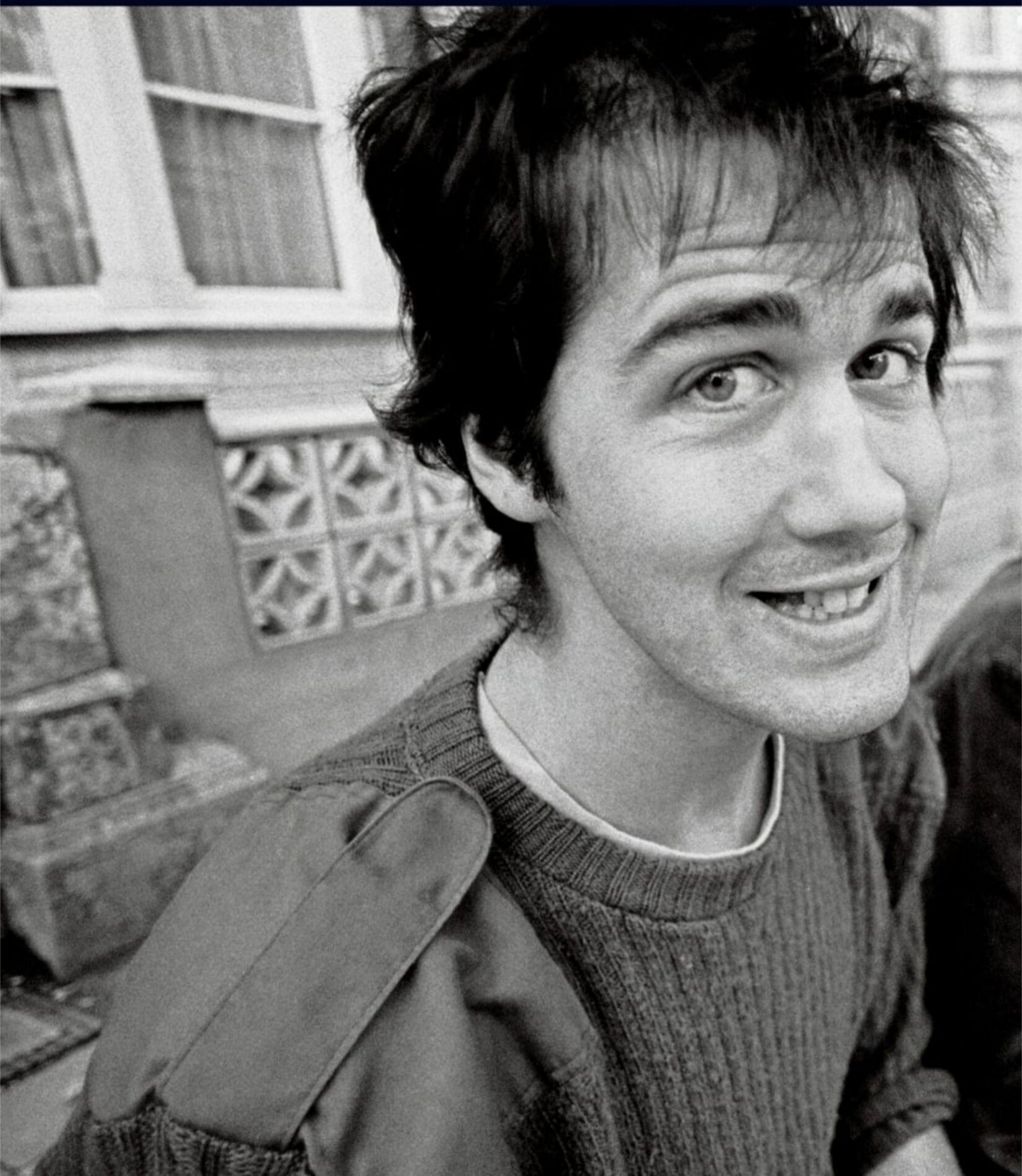
HAS THERE EVER been a lyric that captured the attitude of an entire generation better than, "Here we are now—entertain us"? That line, delivered amidst a cavalcade of free-associative imagery in the chorus of Nirvana's breakout single "Smells Like Teen Spirit," managed to vividly invoke the jaded energy of the then-emergent wave of American humanity dubbed Generation X. The children of aging hippies who had been formed by the cultural crassness of the Reagan '80s, they emerged into adulthood at the dawn of the '90s disaffected by politics, economics, and even pop culture. The result was a massive counterpunch that challenged a multitude of establishment systems—not always with alternate solutions as much as a resigned shrug.

At the center of that accidental revolution was Nirvana, a trio from Seattle led by a charismatic agent of chaos named Kurt Cobain. Their reign was brief: Three proper albums in five years, with a sudden ending punctuated by Cobain's suicide in 1994. Harnessing the raw, primal energy of punk rock and the brutal might of metal into a new sonic stew that would come to be known as grunge, Nirvana lit powder kegs wherever they went, crashing the Billboard charts and award shows with an unpredictable and devilish attitude. The music became the soundtrack of young people thirsty for something to call their own, and Cobain acted as a pied piper who opened eyes to new ideas, sounds and possibilities.

Then, as intensely as it had begun, it was over. Cobain's death not only took the air out of the alternative music movement but also deflated Gen X as a whole. The spirit of possibility that surrounded Nirvana at their peak decomposed into disappointment and missed opportunities. Nevermind, indeed.

But even though the story of Nirvana didn't have to play out the way it did, Nirvana had to happen. They delivered exactly what the times and their audience needed. And, even in absentia, the significance of the band is still relevant to the listeners that responded all those years ago. Here we are now—still talking with reverence about Nirvana.

INTRODUCTION



Novoselic, Cobain and Grohl in Shepherd's Bush, London, in October 1990.

Grohl (below, right) at a recording studio in the Netherlands in 1991.

Nirvana jams together in a Netherlands recording studio in 1991 (right, top).

Cobain held up by fans in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1991 (right, bottom).

INTRODUCTION

Courtney Love (left) and Cobain in New York City on Jan. 10, 1992.

AMANDA
WACK
CREW
THANK
YOU.
KURT!

A graffitied bench close to Cobain's Seattle home (left, top).

Fans bring flowers to Cobain's home in April 1994 (left, bottom).

Cobain performing with Nirvana on *MTV Unplugged* in November 1993 (below).

INTRODUCTION

Taking Cobain's place at Nirvana's 2014 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction were Joan Jett (second from left) Lorde (in pink), St. Vincent (third from right) and Kim Gordon (second from right).

CHAPTER 1

THE SOUND OF DISSATISFACTION

Grunge was never a proper genre—it was more a way to label a movement

Eddie Vedder sings with Pearl Jam in Amsterdam on Feb. 12, 1992.

CHAPTER 1

Buzz Osborne, lead singer of Melvins, in London in 1991 (below).

Jonathan Poneman (near right) and Bruce Pavitt, of Sub Pop Records.

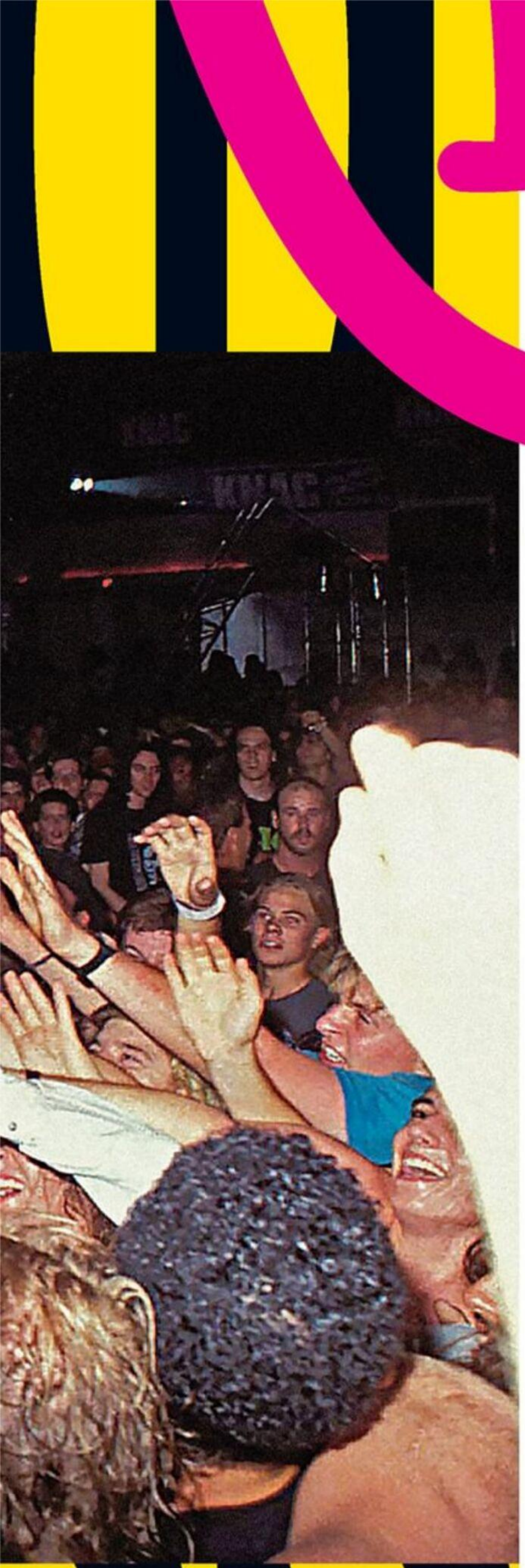
THE 1990s STILL hadn't been defined when everybody in the world of rock 'n' roll came to know what "grunge" was thanks to ascendant albums by Nirvana, Pearl Jam and Soundgarden. Grunge became something of a catch-all for the broader wave of alternative rock that had begun to infect the airwaves, but its fundamental melding of snarling 1970s punk, Zeppelin-kissed hard rock, and Lennon-McCartney melodies ran through the disparate acts that hit paydirt in the wake of Nirvana's *Nevermind* rising to the top of the albums chart in early 1992.

The big wave of grunge had actually started to swell several years earlier in Seattle. In the late 1970s and early '80s, robust local underground music scenes gestated all over the country as punk turned rock 'n' roll dreams into an egalitarian possibility. Cities including Minneapolis, Boston and Athens, Georgia, saw the simultaneous influx of new bands and new outlets on which to hear them, especially college radio. Seattle was no different, and by the mid '80s there was a robust community built around a series of clubs, studios, record stores, radio stations and local labels.

One of those labels, C/Z Records, released a compilation in 1986 called *Deep Six* that has become the Rosetta Stone of grunge. The half-dozen groups who appeared on the album—Soundgarden (who had been together less than a year), Melvins, Malfunkshun, Green River, Skin Yard and The U-Men—represented not only some of the most inventive bands in Washington, but also a bunch of seeds that would eventually blossom into grunge's major players, including

MURRA
HOUSE
SEAWEED
I
PAYOLA

Soundgarden's Chris Cornell crowd-surfs in Hollywood in 1991.



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CHAPTER 1

Nirvana: Melvins frontman Buzz Osborne was friends with a teenage Kurt Cobain and would later introduce him to Dave Grohl; Melvins drummer Dale Crover was an early Nirvana drummer; and Skin Yard guitarist Jack Endino would later produce Nirvana's full-length debut album, *Bleach*. Meanwhile, Green River members would later make up the cores of both Pearl Jam and Mudhoney.

Deep Six wasn't a hit, but it did establish a sonic template that informed all of the biggest grunge records from then on: loud guitars, punk attitude, metal heaviness and a penchant for gut-spilling vocals that split the difference between melodic and maladjusted. Around the time that Deep Six hit the streets, Bruce Pavitt and Jonathan Poneman launched Sub Pop, a label that became the sun around which the rest of the Seattle sound would revolve. At the end of the '80s, they signed and put out records by Mudhoney and Soundgarden and released the first seven-inch single from Nirvana.

Some of the Seattle bands found underground success and became critical darlings, but it took until 1991 for grunge to become a nationwide buzzword. That year saw the release of Nirvana's *Nevermind*, Soundgarden's *Badmotorfinger* and Pearl Jam's *Ten*. Despite their often caustic approaches, each of those albums elbowed their way into the new modern rock radio format and

The members of Alice in Chains pose together in 1990 (below).

A group portrait of The Smasing Pumpkins taken in London in 1992 (right).

Layne Staley singing with Alice in Chains, circa 1989 (below).

Soundgarden frontman Chris Cornell performing onstage in 1991 (right).

found heavy rotation on MTV. They are relatively disparate-sounding albums, but the bands behind them did share some things in common: unparalleled energy, a charismatic frontman and a city of origin. If three is enough to make a genre, group them under the banner of grunge.

By 1992, *Nevermind* had found its way to No. 1 on the albums chart, displacing Michael Jackson's *Dangerous* and announcing a new era in music. Record labels engaged in a feeding frenzy that led to huge albums by non-Seattle bands capable of mimicking grunge's heavy fuzz and doom-centered worldview. As a result, groups including The Smashing Pumpkins, Dinosaur Jr. and Stone Temple Pilots were all considered grunge, too—at least to the mainstream market. This broad classification wasn't necessarily bad for the artists. If you had big chunky guitars and a tortured frontman, you were well on your way to the top of the charts.

But just as quickly as grunge became a national phenomenon, it fell out of fashion with even greater velocity. After Cobain died in April 1994 and Nirvana disbanded, alternative nation was left without a figurehead, and the momentum gradually dissipated: Pearl Jam consciously made themselves smaller, Soundgarden broke up in 1997, and Alice in Chains was derailed by singer Layne Staley's problems with heroin (another main character that emerged during the grunge revolution). There were still top-level alt-rock records produced in the mid '90s, including watershed releases from The Smashing Pumpkins and Veruca Salt, but the core sound splintered into countless subgenres and gave way to a new wave of polyglots, including Beck and Radiohead. The grunge label quickly went from powerful to parody, yet the bands that started the revolution had left behind a legacy worthy of serious consideration.

CHAPTER 2

AGE OF INNOCENCE

Kurt Cobain was a well-adjusted kid who became a troubled young man

Cobain mugs for the camera in Shepherd's Bush, London, in October 1990.

The dining room in
Cobain's childhood home
in Aberdeen, Washington.

ABERDEEN, Washington, is as nondescript as the Pacific Northwest suburbs get: graying homes, anonymous strip malls and an eternal dampness thanks to a seemingly perpetual rainfall. But if Aberdeen has a claim to fame, it's that it was the town in which Kurt Cobain spent his childhood and grew from a happy-go-lucky boy into a tortured rock star.

The youngest version of Cobain had a home life that could easily be described as idyllic. Born to Wendy and Donald Cobain in February 1967, Kurt was a bright child who showed affection for music and the arts at an early age and enjoyed a tight bond with his mother. "My mom was always physically affectionate with me. We always kissed goodbye and hugged," Kurt said. "I'm surprised to find out that so many families aren't that way. Those were pretty blissful times."

Kurt was an extrovert. He loved drawing, staging stunts like his idol, Evel Knievel, and banging around on a toy drum set he got one year for Christmas. But when he was 8 years old, his parents divorced, and both Kurt and his younger sister, Kim, were caught in a the middle of a bitter custody battle. "It just destroyed his life," said Wendy Cobain. "He changed completely. He became very inward."

CHAPTER 2

"I just remember all of a sudden not being the same person," Kurt said. "I didn't feel like I deserved to be hanging out with other kids, because they had parents and I didn't anymore."

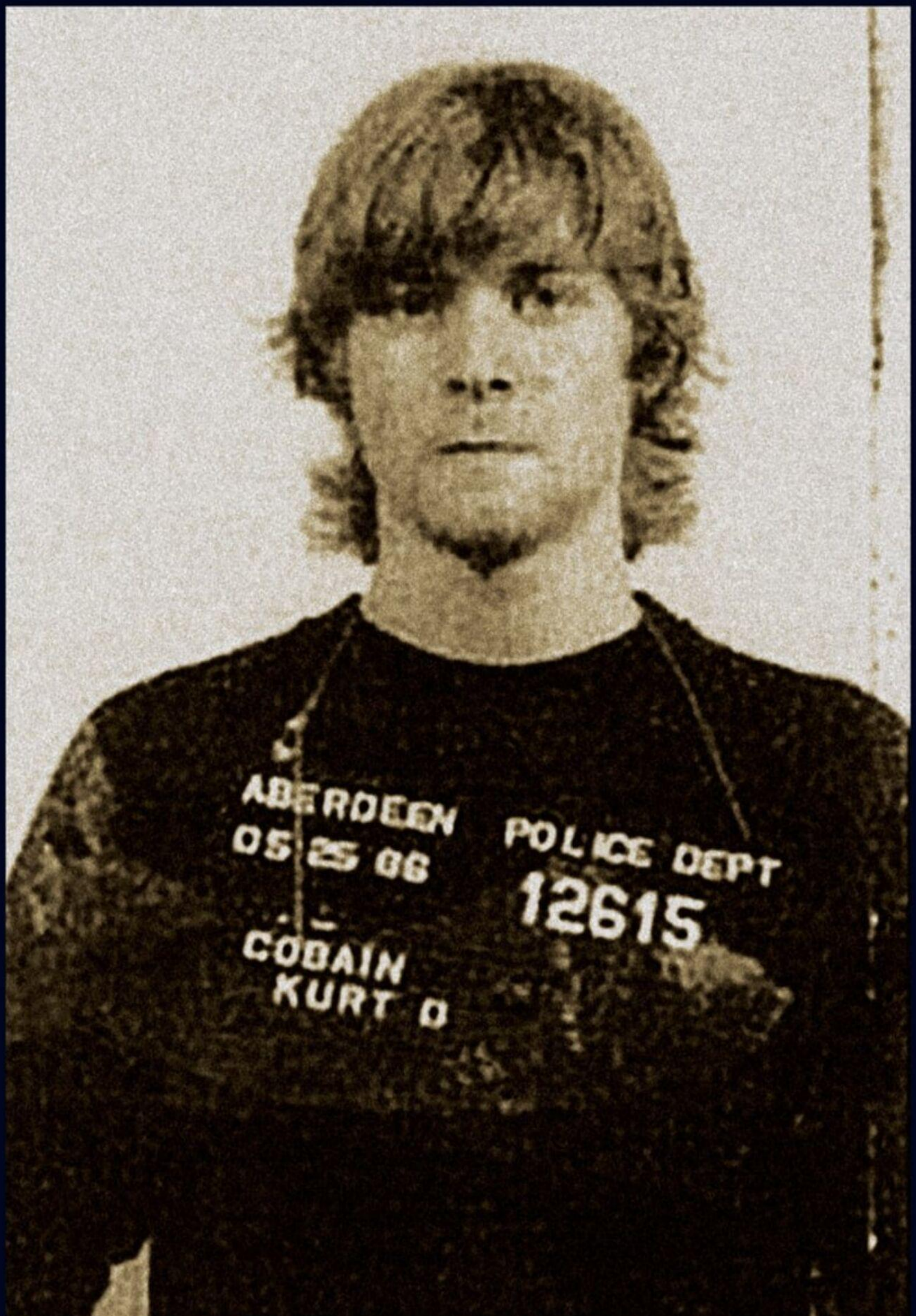
As Kurt withdrew from the world, he focused more on art and music than getting together with friends. The fact that Wendy's new boyfriend was abusive to both of them compounded that isolation. For a time, Kurt went to live with his dad, a situation that was no better. Don Cobain remarried not long after the divorce, and Kurt didn't get along with either his new stepmom or the kids she'd brought with her to the family. The hostility at home was bad enough, but Kurt's preteen misery was further amplified by an utter disinterest in school and a series of chronic physical ailments, including stomach trouble that would plague him for the rest of his life.

One upside to Kurt's time with his dad was Don's record collection, which was regularly updated with new releases by the era's biggest and splashiest rock acts, including Aerosmith, Black Sabbath and KISS. Those albums made Kurt want to learn guitar, and on his 14th birthday he got his first electric with a tiny amplifier. He briefly took lessons from one of his uncle's friends, just long enough to learn how to play AC/DC's "Back in Black." Later on, he discovered punk rock and told anyone who would listen he was going to start a punk band.

This teenage version of Kurt didn't get along with many people, but he tended to bond with those who shared his enthusiasm for music no matter what the genre. He met Buzz Osborne, who founded the Melvins, and became something of a hanger-on and a roadie for the group when

The exterior of Cobain's childhood home in Aberdeen (left).

Cobain's mugshot after his arrest for vandalism in May 1986 (below).



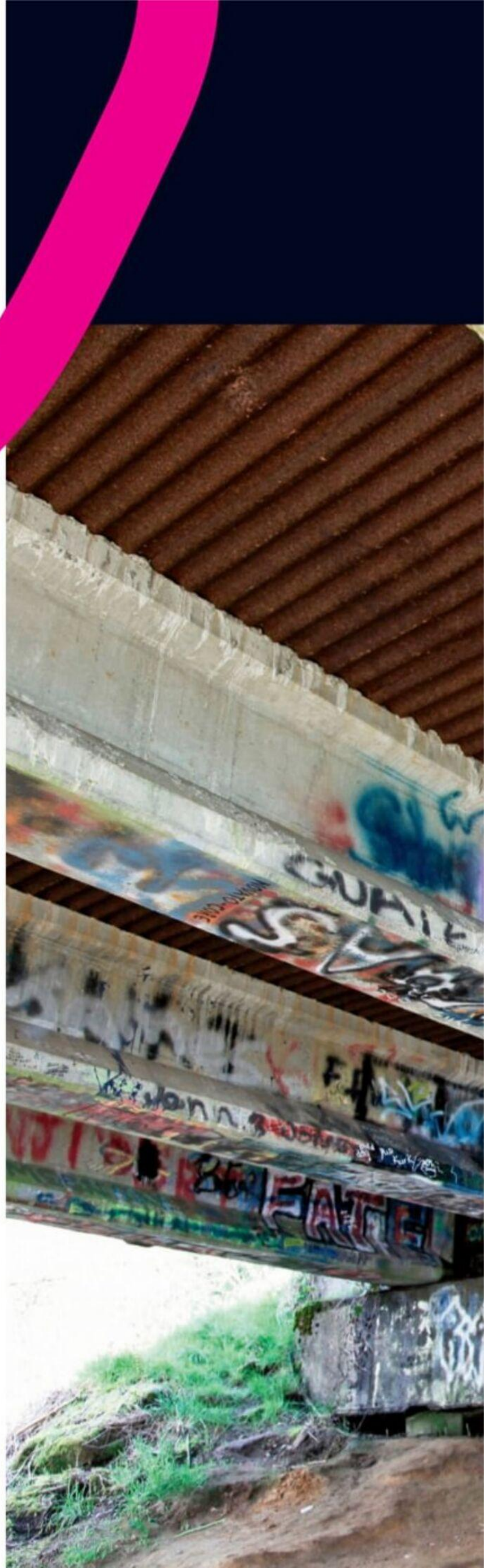
CHAPTER 2

The members of Nirvana: (from left) Dave Grohl, Cobain, Krist Novoselic.

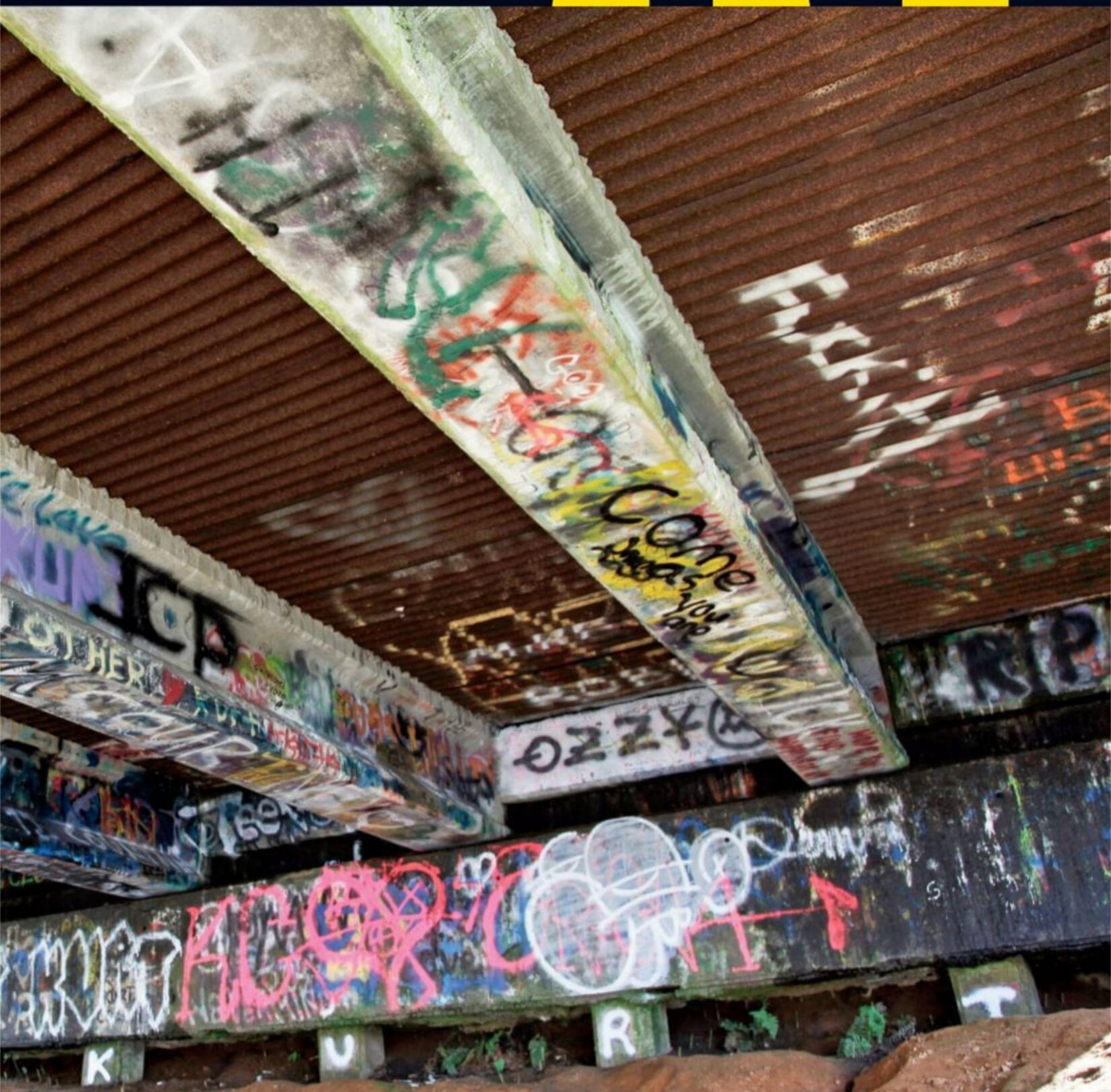
CHAPTER 2

they played gigs in Seattle. Kurt had already begun writing and recording songs on his own, and had resolved to make music his life's work. "I'm so glad I got into punk rock at the time I did," he said. "It gave me these few years that I needed to grow up and put my values in perspective and realize what kind of person I am."

Facing an uphill battle to finish high school, Kurt dropped out. With no money and no prospects, he was essentially homeless, crashing on a series of drug dealers' couches or occasionally spending the night under the North Aberdeen Bridge, an experience he would later recount in the *Nevermind* closer "Something in the Way." But there was one bright spot: Kurt had begun hanging out regularly with another local named Krist Novoselic, who had also attended Aberdeen High. Novoselic was impossibly tall, had a goofy sense of humor that Kurt loved, and shared the same affinity for such hard-core groups as Black Flag. They were fast friends, and Kurt knew they could make music together. He recorded a cassette tape of some crude songs he had written—he dubbed the work *Fecal Matter*—and gave it to Krist to try to coax him into joining him. A year passed before Krist told Kurt: "I finally listened to that tape you made. It's pretty good. We should start a band."



The bridge in Aberdeen under which a teenage Cobain used to sleep.



CHAPTER 3

QUIET AMBITION

With Nirvana, Cobain was always conflicted between wanting to remain obscure and wanting to hit it big

Cobain performing onstage with Nirvana in the 1990s.

CHAPTER 3

A **LARGE THEME** in Nirvana's often misunderstood mythology is that Kurt Cobain resented the band becoming popular. The truth is, Cobain always wanted his music to become well-known and well-liked. While he and Krist Novoselic bonded over their shared affinity for heavy '70s rock and caustic '80s punk, the true roots of Nirvana had actually begun with Creedence Clearwater Revival.

There was nothing that sounded like "Fortunate Son" on the *Fecal Matter* tape, but Cobain was determined to make a career out of music and figured CCR would appeal to locals in Aberdeen, and that the enthusiasm would get the band gigs. Cobain and Novoselic dubbed themselves the Sellouts—a guilty acknowledgment of commercial ambition that would make any Gen Xer proud—and started drilling covers with Cobain on drums, Novoselic on guitar, and a guy named Steve Newman playing bass. They never got a single gig—a few rehearsals into the Sellouts' existence, Cobain and Newman got into a fight that turned physical and the group dissolved.

But Cobain and Novoselic kept playing together, and shortly after the end of the Sellouts fiasco they brought in a drummer named Aaron Burckhard and started anew. Cobain could never be accused of having a work ethic (he rarely held down a job for long) except when it came to music, and the new trio rehearsed for hours every day. They beat the *Fecal Matter* songs into shape and almost immediately started generating new material, which combined the heft of metal with artier punk bands like the Butthole Surfers and Scratch Acid. Their earliest shows—including a couple of

Creedence Clearwater Revival (left) was an early influence on Cobain.

Krist Novoselic and Cobain performing in Belgium in 1991 (below).

Cobain singing with Nirvana in Amsterdam in November 1991 (below).

The Dutch band Shocking Blue (right, in 1970) was an inspiration for Cobain.

house parties and some sets at a converted porn theater in Tacoma—were confounding, largely because they were bombastic and noisy, and the centerpiece was a cover of the obscure song "Love Buzz" by Dutch psych rockers Shocking Blue, whose biggest hit was "Venus," later sent to the top of the American charts by Bananarama.

The band played its earliest shows without a name. When the time came to put them on a marquee they chose the moniker Skid Row, but that didn't stick. Cobain contemplated a handful of other ideas, including Throat Oyster and Pen Cap Chew, but ultimately settled on Nirvana. "I wanted a name that was kind of beautiful or nice and pretty instead of a mean, raunchy punk rock name like the Angry Samoans," Cobain said. (Later, Nirvana would have to pay out a sizable sum of money to a British band that had been using the name since 1966.)

Burckhard wasn't committed in the same way his bandmates were. He eventually drifted away from the group, leaving them without a drummer. Dale Crover from the Melvins filled in while they prepared themselves to record a proper demo, which they cut with local great Jack Endino at his Reciprocal Recording studio in Seattle. Endino liked the tape and spread it around to his pals in town, including Jonathan Poneman, who had recently launched a label called Sub Pop. "I was just thoroughly blown away by the guy's voice," Poneman said. "The band obviously had a lot of

CHAPTER 3

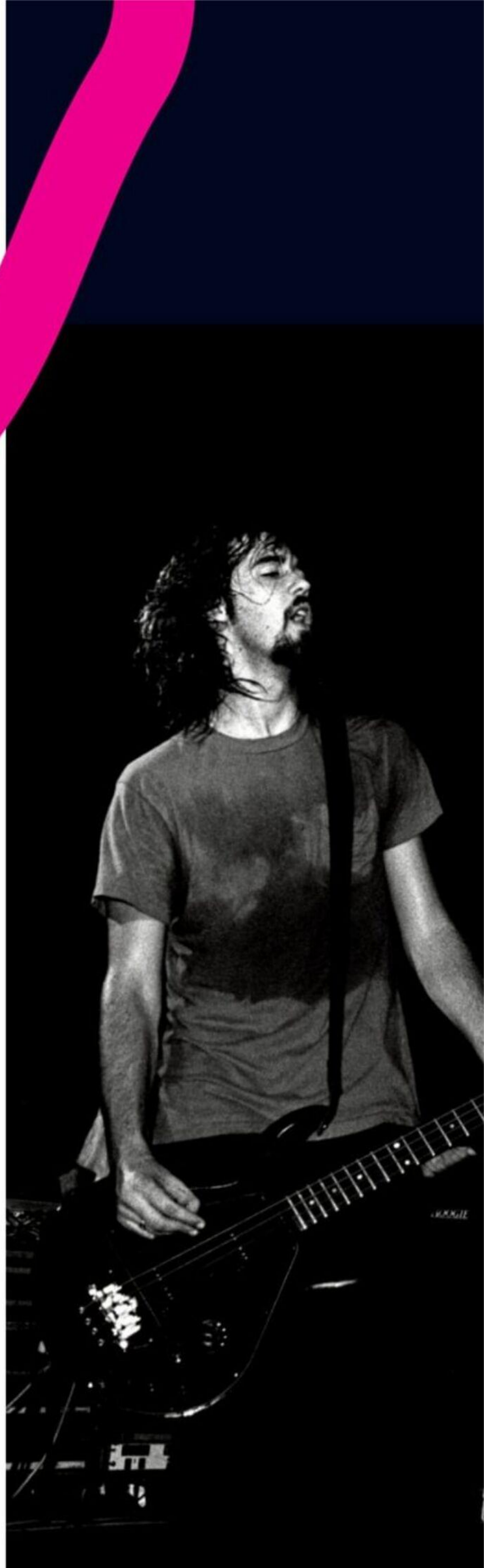
Cobain worked hard to put Nirvana on a path to success.

CHAPTER 3

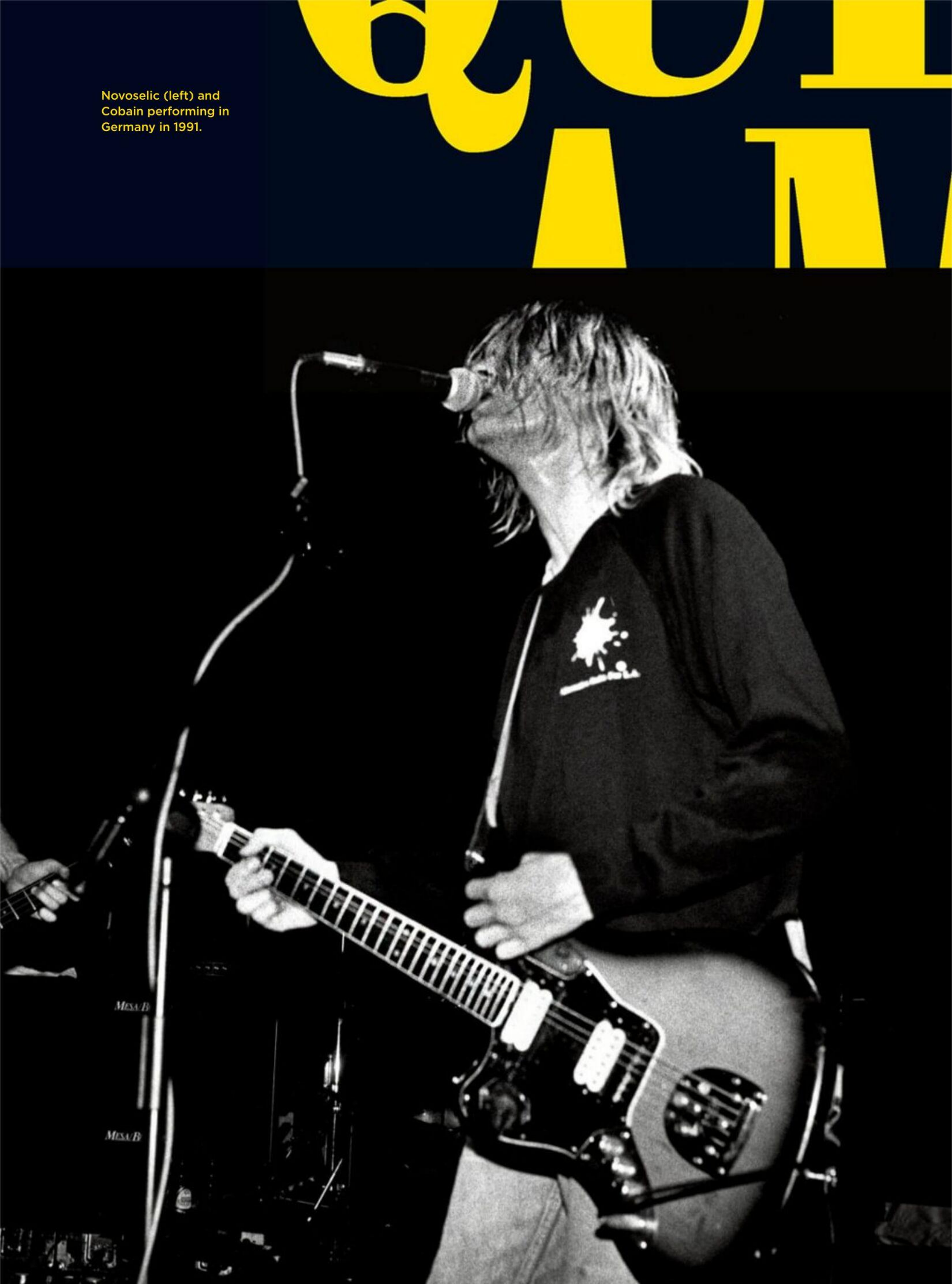
raw power. I just remember hearing the tape and going, 'Oh, my God!'"

Cobain had been passing around the demo too, mailing out copies to punk and indie labels. He was punk rock to his core, but he also had a thirst for success, partially to prove everybody wrong and partially because being a rock star sounded pretty cool. His ambiguity tortured him. "I was always on the left or right side of not caring and not wanting to, yet kind of wanting to at the same time," he said of finding big-time success. "It's kind of confusing."

Meanwhile, Nirvana's lineup remained in flux. Despite playing on the demo, Crover was only ever going to be temporary, and he eventually decamped to San Francisco. His pal Dave Foster sat in for a while, and then Burckhard briefly circled back in before Cobain and Novoselic settled on Chad Channing, a drummer from Bainbridge Island. He joined just in time to play on the group's first single for Sub Pop, a version of "Love Buzz" that had become a live staple. It hit the streets right around the time the Seattle scene started to pick up steam, and bands like Mudhoney and Screaming Trees were starting to gain attention outside the city. The limited-run "Love Buzz" single sold out instantly, and Nirvana were ready to take the next step: their first album.



Novoselic (left) and Cobain performing in Germany in 1991.



CHAPTER 4

THE ALBUMS

Three for the ages, Nirvana's catalog was short, loud and sweet

Few bands made a bigger impact

NIRVANA ONLY PRODUCED THREE PROPER STUDIO ALBUMS during their brief time as a band, but you would be hard pressed to find more impact in a discography so small. Musically speaking, Kurt Cobain was always being pulled internally in two separate directions: noisy, art-damaged punk deconstructions on one end, impossibly tuneful Beatlesesque pop tunes on the other. That tension plays out across each one of the band's three albums, and the constant yank of those two poles—combined with the aforementioned jarring sonic booms and borderline-blissful hooks—made each record exciting in its own way. In keeping with the band's all-or-nothing attitude, no song in the entire Nirvana catalog ends on a fade out.

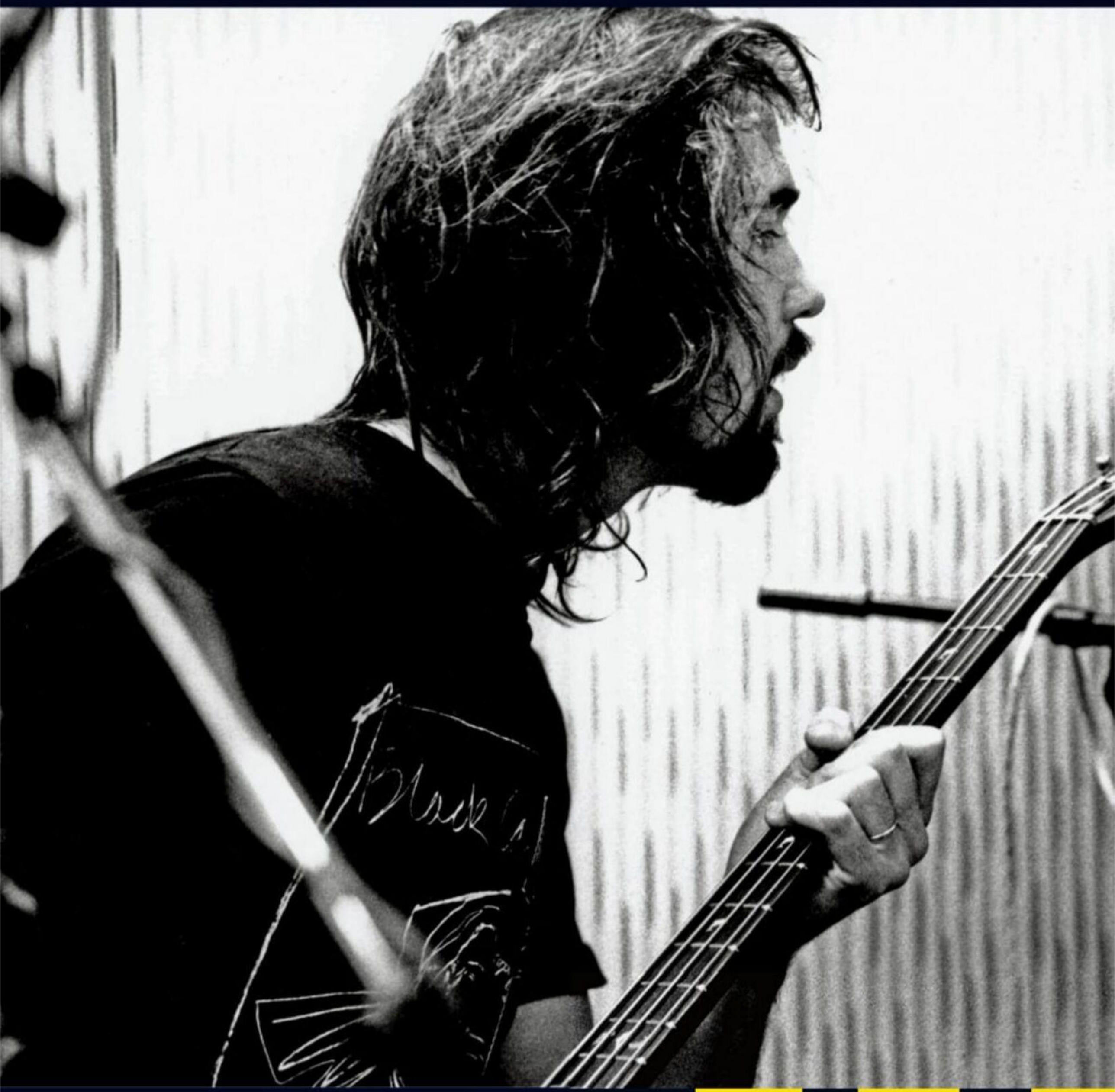
NIRVANA

NIRVANA

IN UTERO

CHAPTER 4

Bassist Krist Novoselic in a recording studio in the Netherlands in 1991.



Bleach

1989

About a month after the release of the "Love Buzz" single, Nirvana returned to Reciprocal Recording to work with Jack Endino on their first full-length album. The band reworked a handful of tunes from their demo and excised a lot of the more complicated arrangements and time signatures in favor of a straight-ahead approach. It's still very raw, but with some special standouts: the sweetly ambling "About a Girl," the aggro "Mr. Mustache," the hypnotic "Paper Cuts." The real takeaway is Cobain's voice, which is a truly bizarre instrument, capable of expressing the most visceral pain, the most arresting melancholy, and on the chugging "Floyd the Barber," blasts of genuine euphoria.

1. "Blew"
2. "Floyd the Barber"
3. "About a Girl"
4. "School"
5. "Love Buzz"
6. "Paper Cuts"
7. "Negative Creep"
8. "Scoff"
9. "Swap Meet"
10. "Mr. Moustache"
11. "Sifting"

CHAPTER 4

Drummer Dave Grohl joined Nirvana just before it cut *Nevermind*.

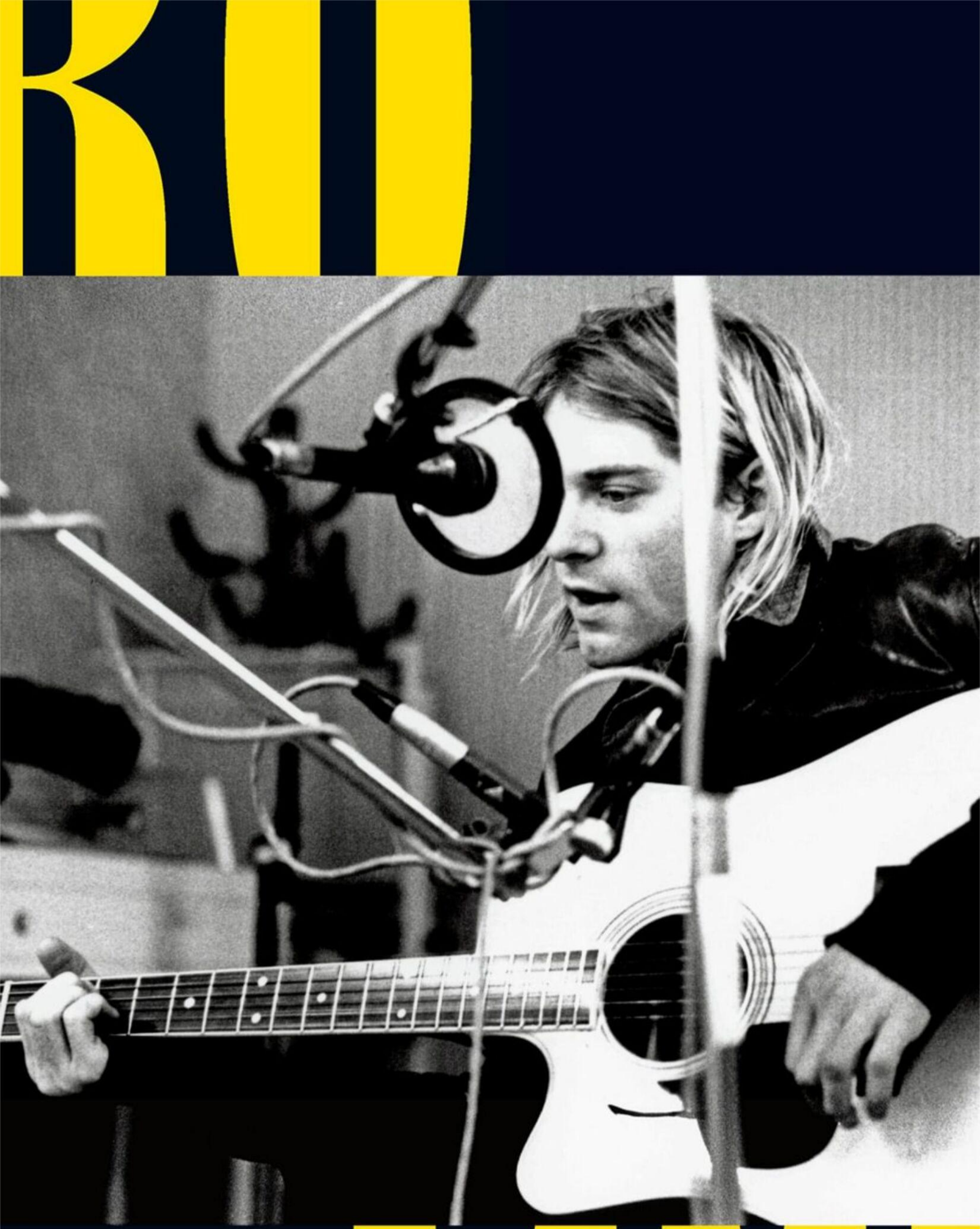
Nevermind

1991

While on a seemingly endless tour for *Bleach*, Cobain was already working hard on a follow-up. Nirvana visited producer Butch Vig in Wisconsin to lay down some demos, including a recognizable version of "Smells Like Teen Spirit." New drummer Dave Grohl joined the trio just before they cut the *Nevermind* tracks in California, and the result was a revolution. Vig's approach was bigger and slicker, but that was only in service to Cobain's songs, which had become more dynamic and melodic. Still, for an album that went multi-platinum, there are some down-and-dirty punk moments, including the hard-core-adjacent "Territorial Pissings" and hidden noise party "Endless, Nameless."

1. "Smells Like Teen Spirit"
2. "In Bloom"
3. "Come as You Are"
4. "Breed"
5. "Lithium"
6. "Polly"
7. "Territorial Pissings"
8. "Drain You"
9. "Lounge Act"
10. "Stay Away"
11. "On a Plain"
12. "Something in the Way"
13. "Endless, Nameless" (Hidden Track)

1990



Kurt Cobain's songwriting deftly straddled punk and pop.

CHAPTER 4

In Utero

1993

Dismissing *Nevermind* as "too slick," Cobain turned to minimalist punk producer Steve Albini for the group's third album. While it spurns the arena rock presentation of its predecessor, *In Utero* is still a collection of Kurt Cobain songs. And for all the posturing about making an album that would actively alienate people, these are still incredible pop tunes. The delicate "Dumb" and surgically balanced "Heart-Shaped Box" are the best examples, but there's plenty of singalong melody lurking amidst the feedback-drenched fuzz of "Radio Friendly Unit Shifter" and "Serve the Servants," the latter of which opens the album with perhaps the definitive Cobain lyric: "Teenage angst has paid off well, now I'm bored and old."

1. "Serve the Servants"
2. "Scentless Apprentice"
3. "Heart-Shaped Box"
4. "Rape Me"
5. "Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge on Seattle"
6. "Dumb"
7. "Very Ape"
8. "Milk It"
9. "Pennyroyal Tea"
10. "Radio Friendly Unit Shifter"
11. "Tourette's"
12. "All Apologies"

CHAPTER 5

THE FAME MACHINE

Once Nirvana became massive, Cobain felt guilty and was intent on undoing it

Nirvana in the early 1990s: (from left) Dave Grohl, Krist Novoselic, Kurt Cobain.

Cobain jumps on Novoselic's back at a show in Belgium in 1991.

CHAPTER 5

NIRVANA'S DEBUT album, *Bleach,* was released in 1989. It cost a few hundred dollars in studio time, a fee fronted by guitarist Jason Everman, who had a brief stint as Nirvana's second guitarist and who is credited on the album even though he didn't actually play a note. *Bleach* was reviewed with relative warmth in the local press, but it took a while for it to gain traction, and fellow Seattle bands Soundgarden and Mudhoney were already starting to break big on a national level.

Nirvana spent the bulk of the next year on the road, first in the U.S. and then in Europe, where Sub Pop had found a lot of success introducing new bands, and where the band's buzz was significantly greater. Their live show, full of incredible energy and unpredictable chaos that often ended with guitars being smashed and Cobain diving into the drum kit, had gained a reputation as a can't-miss event, and one of the big criticisms of *Bleach* was that the record did not reflect the power Nirvana had onstage.

So, in the midst of another run of shows in the Midwest, they hooked up with producer Butch Vig and recorded a handful of demos that Kurt Cobain was tinkering with for Nirvana's follow-up album. The sessions went well, and the band already had

CHAPTER 5

Cobain relaxing in his Tokyo hotel room in December 1992 (below).

Grohl (right, in 1990) joined Nirvana just in time for *Nevermind*.

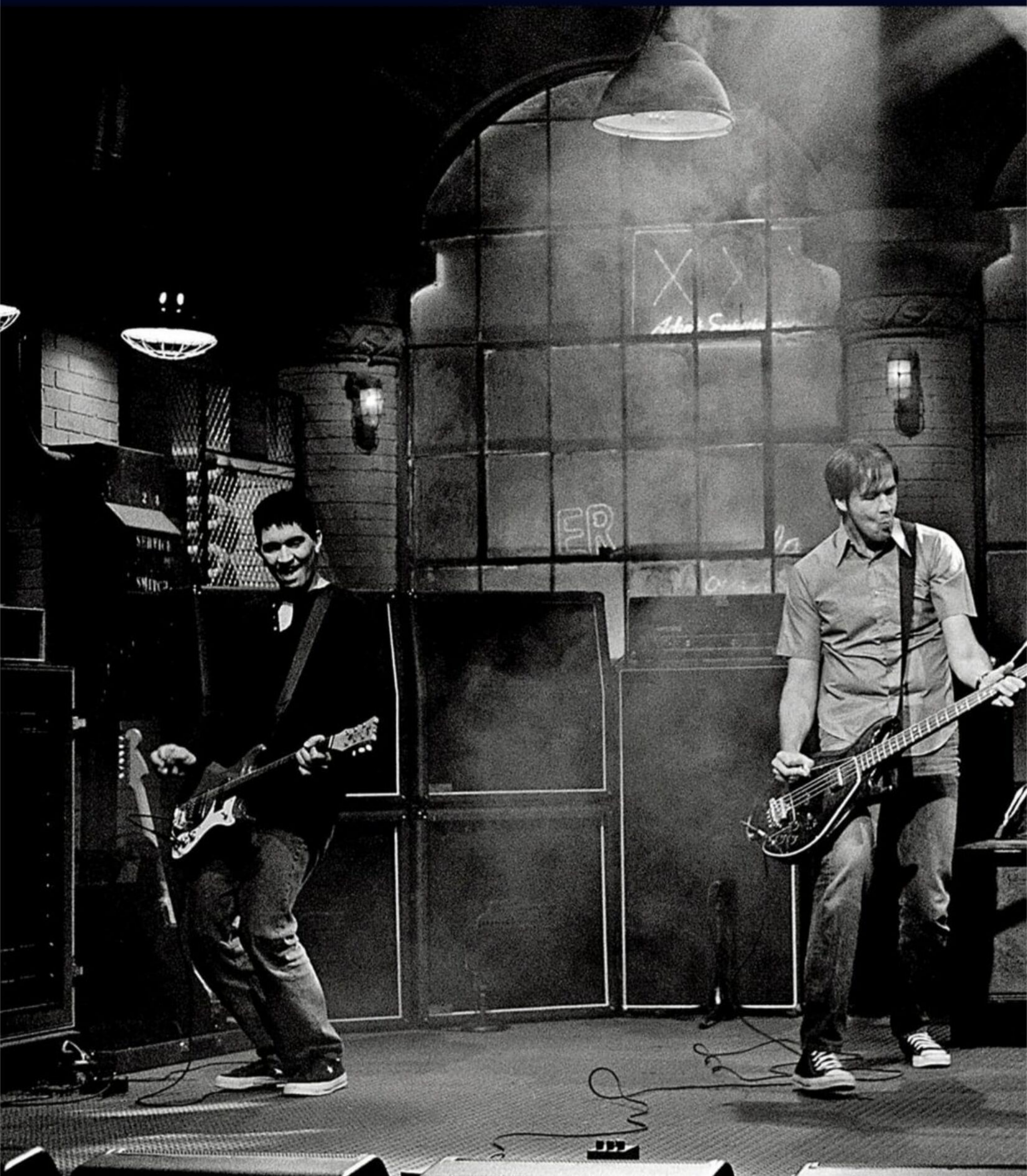
songs like "In Bloom" and "Lithium" in pretty good shape. The intention was to return a few months later to finish the album for Sub Pop. Vig didn't hear anything for a while, and then suddenly started getting calls from people raving about the songs. "They had gone home and dubbed a cassette I gave them, and they made a hundred copies and gave them out to their friends. They bootlegged themselves essentially," Vig said. "That was how Geffen got a copy."

This ended up kickstarting a series of transitions that resulted in Nirvana climbing to the top of the music world. The band signed with Geffen Records, a major label, and began to plot out how they were going to finish their second album. More importantly, Cobain and Novoselic were unhappy with drummer Chad Channing's work on the demos, and Channing was frustrated by his lack of creative input, so they parted ways. Without a drummer, Cobain turned to old friend Buzz Osborne for direction on a replacement, and he pointed him to a guy named Dave Grohl, whose punk band, Scream, had recently broken up. Grohl joined the group, and the classic lineup of Nirvana was ready to make *Nevermind*.

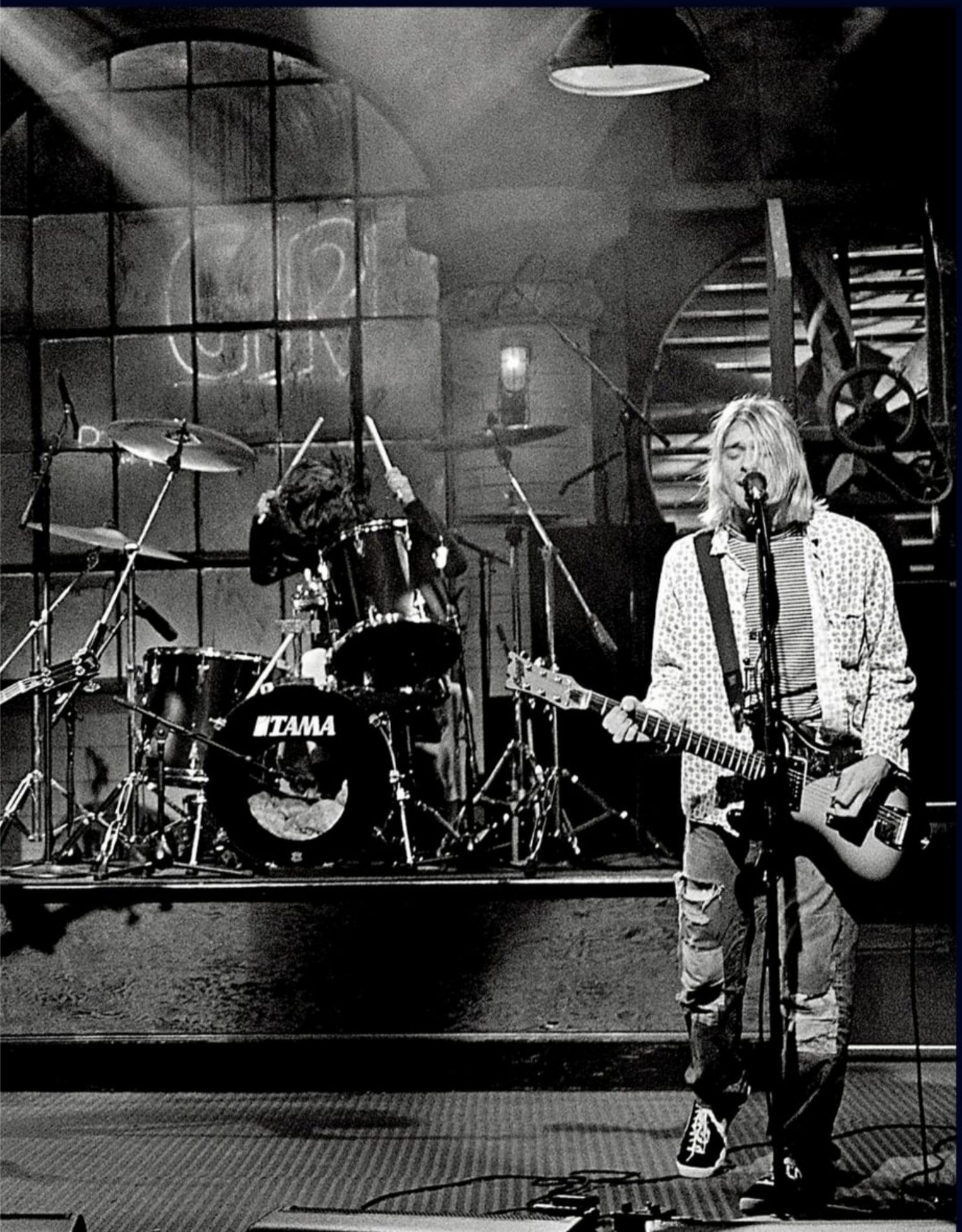
Released in September 1991, *Nevermind* was not an instant sales sensation. (The two biggest rock records at the time were Metallica's self-titled "black album" and Guns N' Roses' *Use Your Illusion*.) But once the adrenaline blast of a video for "Smells Like Teen Spirit" found its way into heavy rotation on MTV, things started to take off.

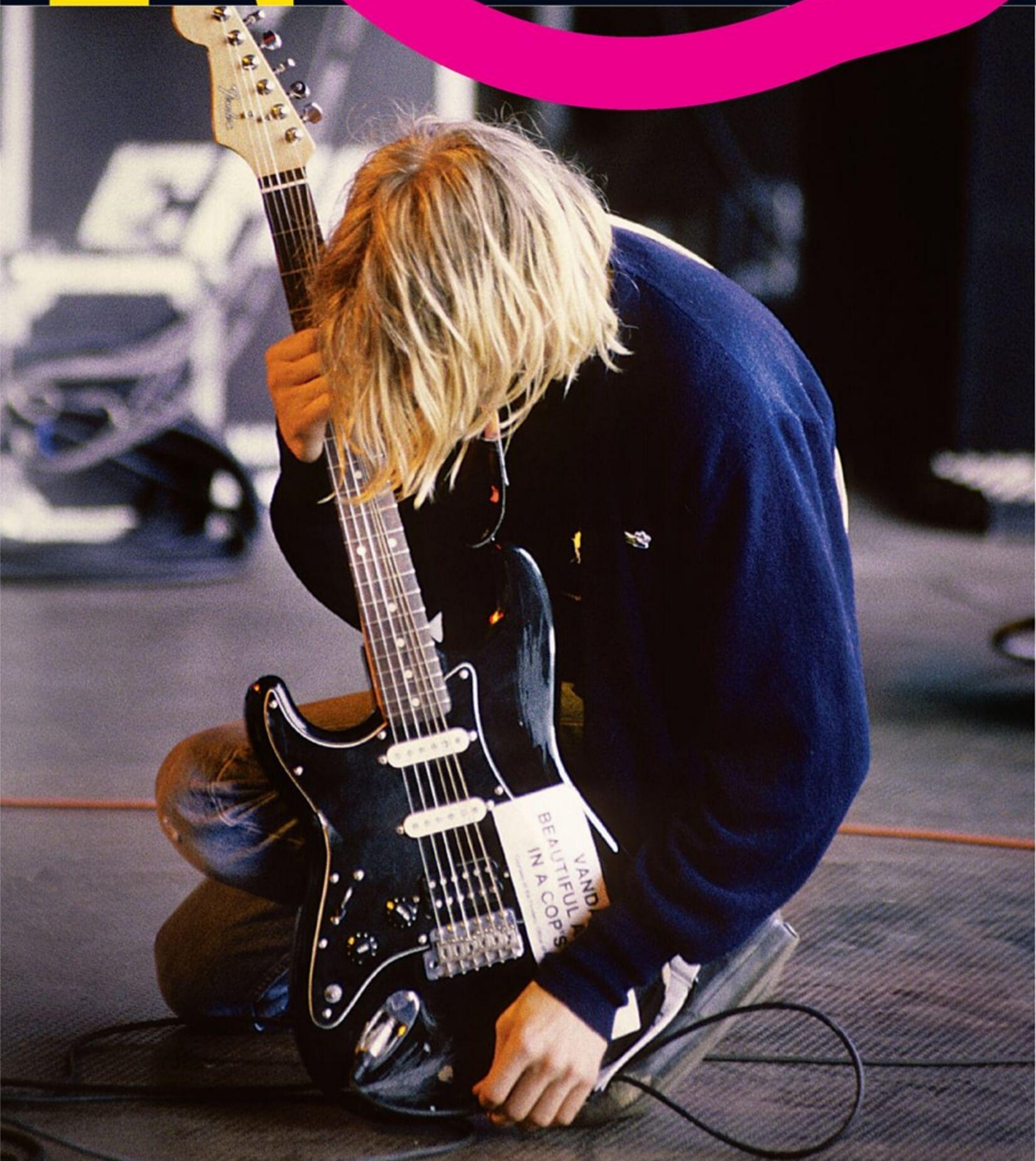
"We didn't sit around watching MTV, so we didn't realize they were playing the s--- out of our video," Grohl said. Nirvana had booked a tour, but the buildings were now too small. "Shows would sell out, and then there'd be an extra 500 people out front, and then there'd be an extra 1,500 people out front," Grohl said. "But we were still in our van, still getting $10 a day, eating corn dogs and staying

CHAPTER 5



Nirvana performs on *Saturday Night Live* on Sept. 25, 1993.




VAND
BEAUTIFUL
IN A COP'S

Cobain gets low onstage in Belgium on Aug. 25, 1991 (left).

MTV star Cobain in a wig at the 1992 Reading Festival (below).

at the Holiday Inn. It was still pretty punk rock."

By the time 1992 dawned, Nirvana had graduated to the next level. They performed on *Saturday Night Live* in January, just as *Nevermind* was making a mad dash to the upper echelon of the Billboard 200. "The record made it to the top 10, and I called their manager and said, 'Is there a chance it could go No. 1?'" Vig said. "And he went, 'Not a chance, Butch. Michael Jackson has the No. 1 record.' And the next week it went to No. 1!"

As the year rolled on, the venues grew bigger and bigger, culminating in a headlining slot at Reading, the most revered festival in Europe. Not only did Nirvana get the prime position on the bill, but Cobain was also drafted to curate the acts who played before him, so he invited along friends and idols like Mudhoney, L7, Melvins, and an ABBA tribute act called Bjorn Again. "He was really into that ABBA cover band. It was genuine," said Charles Peterson, Sub Pop's in-house photographer who shot the collage used on the back cover of *In Utero*. "I remember standing on the side of the stage, and he was standing there watching Bjorn Again with this huge smile."

That festival was a microcosm of all the conflicts within Cobain. He loved pop music enough to groove along to ABBA covers, but Nirvana's performance that day was brutal and intense. He was serious about his music but was also annoyed when the media took his music too seriously. He wanted to be successful, yet resented how big *Nevermind* had become—he almost immediately started talking about how much he didn't like it. ("I'm embarrassed by it now," he said during an interview about the album. "It's closer to a Mötley Crüe record than it is a punk rock record.")

The conflict was on full display in April 1992 when Nirvana first posed for the cover of *Rolling Stone*: Cobain appeared with his bandmates, but he insisted on wearing a homemade T-shirt that read CORPORATE MAGAZINES STILL SUCK.

CHAPTER 6

"BETTER TO BURN OUT...."

The late stages of Kurt Cobain's brief life were full of warnings about what was to come

Cobain during the taping of *MTV Unplugged* in New York City on Nov. 18, 1993.

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Cobain and Courtney Love in Los Angeles in 1992 (below).

Nirvana (from near left: Cobain, Krist Novoselic, Dave Grohl) in Tokyo in 1992.

IN HIS SUICIDE note, which wife Courtney Love read aloud to mourners who'd gathered at an impromptu memorial in Seattle, Kurt Cobain quoted Neil Young when he wrote, "It's better to burn out than to fade away." Cobain's death came as a shock to Nirvana fans the world over. This wasn't the result of a random, tragic impulse. Rather, it was the culmination of more than a year's worth of narrative signposts that pointed directly to the end for both Cobain and Nirvana.

Nevermind was a massive commercial success and a chart mainstay for more than a year, with subsequent singles "Come As You Are," "Lithium" and "In Bloom" taking up permanent residence on rock radio and MTV. That success created a feeding frenzy among record labels desperate to get a piece of "the Seattle sound," which led to deeply uncommercial acts like the Jesus Lizard and Butthole Surfers associating with huge international corporations. "Grunge" became a buzzword and the go-to descriptor for any band that was loud, melodic and tortured, which led not only to huge crossover success for fellow Seattle bands Pearl Jam and Alice in Chains, but also a steady stream of bandwagoners like Stone Temple Pilots, Candlebox and Bush.

It was, in hindsight, a brief moment when Americans took intense interest in Generation X. What made these young people tick? What were their aspirations? What did they want to buy? Despite all the conflicting voices inside of him—or maybe because of them—Kurt Cobain seemed like the young man who held all the answers.

Cobain struggled with how much he wanted to embrace his newfound status as a generational messiah. And it didn't help that his own personal life was in turmoil. He'd had an on-again, off-again

Cobain playing with Nirvana in 1993 on *MTV Unplugged* in New York.

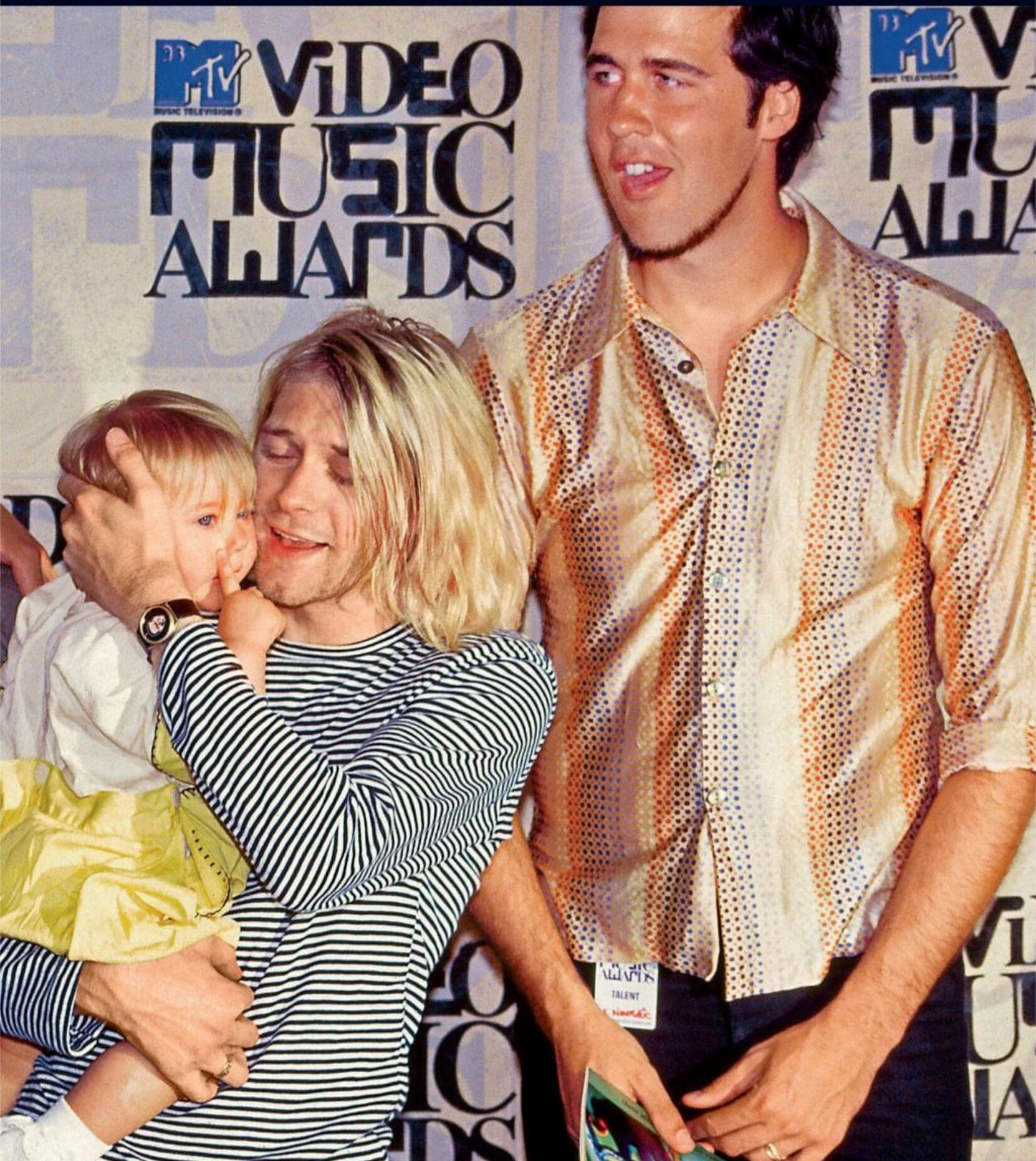
relationship with Hole frontwoman Courtney Love before the pair married in Hawaii in February 1992. But like most everything in Cobain's life, his relationship with Love was complicated.

Despite her chaotic energy, Love was a calming influence on Cobain, particularly during the grind of touring, which often left him isolated and depressed. "I just wanted to add some excitement in my life," Cobain said. "I'd never met anyone so outspoken and charismatic. It seems like she is a magnet for exciting things to happen."

On the other hand, Love indulged in Cobain's worst impulses: They were often drunk together, and during the European tour for *Nevermind* they started doing heroin. Cobain had experimented with the drug years earlier, but he started using more seriously just as Nirvana was peaking. He liked the high, but he also liked the fact that it relieved his chronic stomach pain, an ongoing ailment that often derailed shows.

In the midst of all this, Nirvana started plotting out their next album. Cobain had seen the way *Nevermind* had taken off and wanted to swerve in the opposite direction. Two of his favorite albums—Pixies' *Surfer Rosa* and the Breeders' *Pod*—had the same engineer: Steve Albini, frontman of the proto-industrial punk band Big Black and an unapologetic indie stalwart. "That sound is as close to the sound that I hear in my

Cobain holding his daughter, Frances Bean, on Sept. 2, 1993.


MTV
MUSIC TELEVISION
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AWARDS
TALENT

A memorial wall put up in London to honor Cobain after his suicide (below).

The Seattle house where Cobain killed himself in April 1994 (right).

head that I've ever found," Cobain said of Albini's techniques, particularly when recording drums.

The sessions for the third Nirvana album—initially titled *I Hate Myself and Want to Die*, then *Verse Chorus Verse*, then finally *In Utero*—were relatively breezy, and the group had enough clout to completely shut the record label out of the process. The result was a raw, noisy, aggressive and often transcendent primal scream of a record that made executives at Geffen extremely nervous. Rumors swirled that the label would reject the album and leave it unreleased, an idea that the band leaned into. "The grown-ups don't like it," Cobain said after delivering *In Utero* to the label.

In the end, Nirvana brought in R.E.M. producer Scott Litt to polish a few songs in the mixing stage—one of which, the lead single "Heart-Shaped Box," became a radio staple. *In Utero* arrived in September 1993. It debuted at the top of the albums chart even though some major retailers, including Walmart, refused to stock it because of the vaginal imagery in the artwork and the song "Rape Me." Reviews were universally exuberant, and sales remained steady—*In Utero* was still in the top half of the chart when Nirvana met its sudden end seven months later.

Cobain was largely satisfied with the album, but he continued to abuse heroin and more than once had been taken to the ER because of possible overdoses. He and Courtney's only child, Frances Bean Cobain, was born in the summer of 1992 in a haze of controversy, largely built on a magazine article that suggested Love had used heroin while she was pregnant. That triggered an investigation from the Department of Children and Family Services, which sent a social worker to the family's home. It took a protracted legal battle and months of surprise visits and drug tests for Cobain and Love to prove they were fit parents.

Nirvana hadn't toured since the *Nevermind* run

CHAPTER 6

had wrapped, and they were eager to get back on the road. After releasing *In Utero,* they played a handful of North American dates and prepped for an *MTV Unplugged* special, all largely without incident. But by the time they went to Europe in 1994, things had begun to unravel. While in Rome seeking treatment for his blown-out voice, Cobain overdosed on a combination of champagne and Rohypnol, a powerful sleep drug often used in anesthesia. (Love later called this a suicide attempt.)

The band nixed their final European dates and Cobain returned to Seattle. A week after coming home, Love called police and told them Cobain had locked himself in a room in their new house and was suicidal. Cops confiscated four guns and a bottle of the antianxiety medicine Klonopin but did not detain Cobain. A week later, Love staged an intervention with the help of a counselor and several close friends, including Novoselic and Pat Smear, who'd joined Nirvana as a touring guitarist. It took two days, but they convinced Cobain to go to rehab in Los Angeles. He spent a few days there before escaping and disappearing.

Love, still in L.A. with Frances Bean, hired private investigators to try to find him, but by the time they arrived in Seattle it was too late: Cobain had spent about a week off the grid before barricading himself in the greenhouse of his home and killing himself with a single 20-gauge shotgun blast. His body was found on April 8, 1994. He was 27 years old.

Cobain performing in front of a set of angel's wings, circa 1993.

CHAPTER 7

THE MYTHOLOGY

Kurt Cobain's tragic death brought him even greater fame and attention

Cobain poses for a portrait in Tokyo on Feb. 18, 1992.

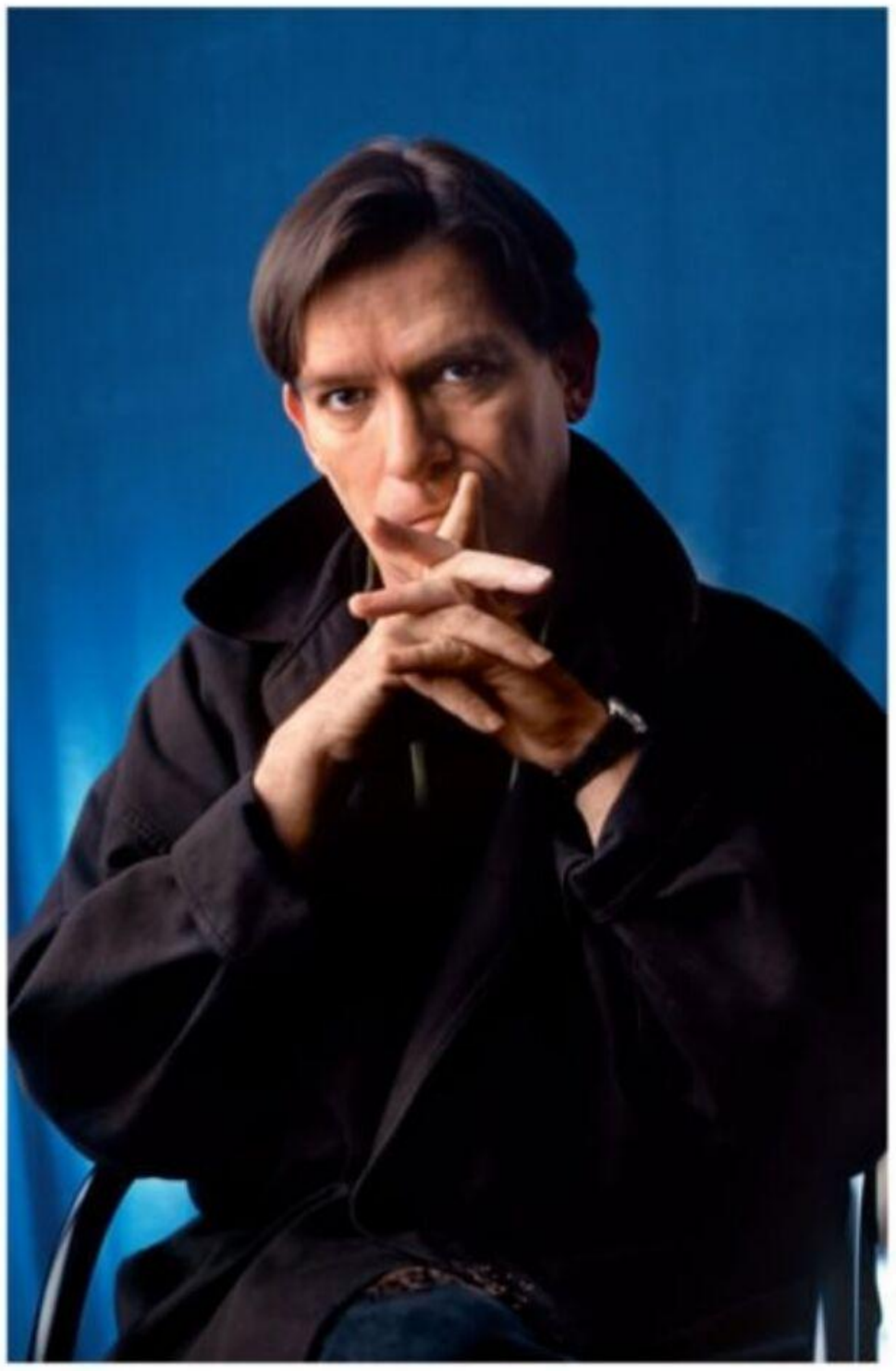
CHAPTER 7

LOCALS WHO were tuned in to Seattle rock radio station KXRX heard about Kurt Cobain's death first, but the bulk of Nirvana fans learned of the frontman's passing when their afternoon music video feed was interrupted by *MTV News*. Anchor Kurt Loder, who had been around at the birth of punk back in the '70s, helped to put the intense impact of Cobain's life and Nirvana's music into perspective. "He had so much to give, and I think in a way he was the closest that his generation came to a John Lennon," *Rolling Stone* editor David Fricke told Loder during that broadcast. "He was writing very much from the heart, very directly, and he didn't play according to the rules."

The news quickly spread across the world. Two days after the discovery of Cobain's body, a memorial service was held near the Space Needle in Seattle, where scores of young people gathered to try to make sense of the tragedy. Courtney Love, who had made her way back from Los Angeles, read Cobain's suicide note to the gathered masses, adding in her own devastating editorial—at one point, she broke down to ask him, "Why didn't you just f---ing stay?"

As tends to happen whenever a high-profile celebrity dies young, conspiracy theories started to spring up. The most pervasive of these was that Cobain had actually been murdered, and that Love—who had already been through a Yoko Ono–style vilification—had somehow been involved. No clear alternative narrative ever emerged, but there were enough unusual details (if he'd had heroin in his system, as the toxicology report showed, how had he been he cogent enough to pull the trigger?) to keep a pre-Internet rumor mill churning. (Multiple documentaries have been made addressing the believed inconsistencies in Cobain's death narrative, and the Seattle Police Department still regularly gets petitions to reopen the case).

Cobain's writing was simultaneously evocative and elusive, so it has been easy for legends to build up around his songs. For a guy who took stands against violence—particularly against



women—there was an awful lot of weapon imagery in his lyrics. (The first three songs on *Nevermind* all have references to guns.) The final song on *In Utero*, "All Apologies," reads a little bit like a farewell. And one of the last images Cobain and Nirvana left behind—their *MTV Unplugged* special, which originally aired in December 1993—was put in heavy rotation on the network after Cobain's suicide. It was also released as a posthumous album in November 1994. Cobain had been particularly invested in that performance, and he'd suggested to show producer Alex Coletti that the stage at Sony Studios in New York be adorned with black candles and white lilies. "You mean like a funeral?" Coletti asked. "Exactly," said Cobain.

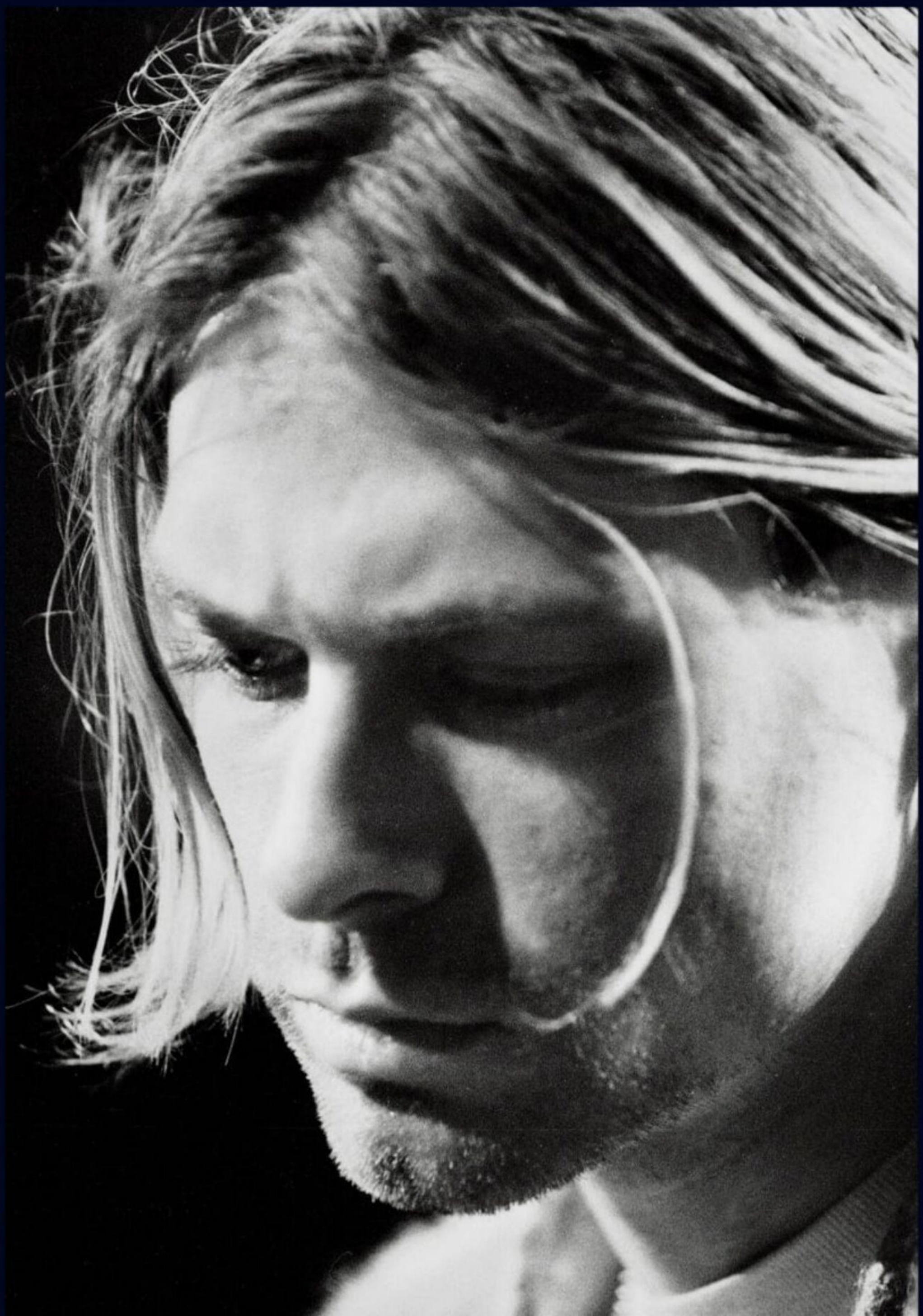
MTV Unplugged in New York debuted at No. 1, ultimately outsold *In Utero*, and provided some sustenance for fans hungry for new Nirvana

Fans stand outside Cobain's Seattle home after his death (below).

MTV's Kurt Loder (left) announced Cobain's death on the network.

Cobain (left) with Nirvana at the taping of *MTV Unplugged* in 1993.

Cobain (below) only wrote a few dozen songs, but they remain indelible.



R.E.M. lead singer Michael Stipe (below) was friends with Cobain.

Cobain at work in a recording studio in the Netherlands in 1991.

material. Cobain was not a prolific songwriter, and he did not leave a trove of unreleased material behind. Following *MTV Unplugged in New York*, Novoselic oversaw the compilation of *From the Muddy Banks of the Wishkah*, a collection of live tunes that spanned Nirvana's career. That arrived in stores in 1996. In 2002, the band released a hits compilation called simply *Nirvana* that included the band's final studio recording, a buzzsaw of a number called "You Know You're Right," which had been cut during the group's final studio session in January 1994. The last of the posthumous Nirvana material arrived in 2004 in the form of a box set called *With the Lights Out*, which featured a multitude of demos, live recordings, covers and alternate mixes of favorites.

At the time of his death, Cobain had largely drifted away from aggressive rock sounds and had become much more enthusiastic about quieter music. One of his favorite records was R.E.M.'s *Automatic for the People*, an almost pastoral collection of folk-pop tunes that was also a massive hit. Cobain had become close with R.E.M. frontman Michael Stipe—he is Frances Bean's godfather, and in October 2023 officiated her wedding to Riley Hawk, son of skateboard legend Tony Hawk—and the two '90s icons had been talking about collaborating before Cobain killed himself. "I know what the next Nirvana record was going to sound like," Stipe said. "It was going to be very quiet and acoustic, with lots of stringed instruments. It was going to be an amazing f---ing record, and I'm a little bit angry at him for killing himself."

Friends agree that had Cobain survived, his music likely would have taken a more stripped-down turn, in the vein of his cover of Lead Belly's "In the Pines" that appeared on *Unplugged* as "Where Did You Sleep Last Night." "Toward the end of his career, he was tired of screaming and tired of big arenas, and he wanted to have more control," said

CHAPTER 3

Charles Cross, author of the definitive Cobain biography, *Heavier Than Heaven*. "My vision is Kurt as a dean, a statesman, but he's still writing and putting out really weird records. He [would be] Neil Young."

When Cobain died, he left behind a wife, a daughter, a handful of collaborators, and a few dozen indelible songs. He also left a deep generational imprint as a rebel who hadn't played by the rules even after he'd become the era's definitive rock star. And he set a progressive example for young men in rejecting the sexist hedonism of hair metal. "I would like to get rid of the homophobes, sexists and racists in our audience," Cobain said. "I know they're out there and it really bothers me. If any of you in any way hate homosexuals, people of a different color, or women, please do this one favor for us: Don't come to our shows and don't buy our records."

He was a gender-bender who famously wore a dress during his appearance on the MTV metal show *Headbanger's Ball* ("It's a ball, so I thought I'd wear a gown," he told host Riki Rachtman.) Cobain often talked about embracing his own femininity, something that played into Nirvana's induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2014. When the time came for the band to perform, his vocal duties were handled by a quartet of women: Joan Jett, Kim Gordon, St. Vincent and Lorde.

Cobain with Courtney Love and daughter Frances Bean in 1993.

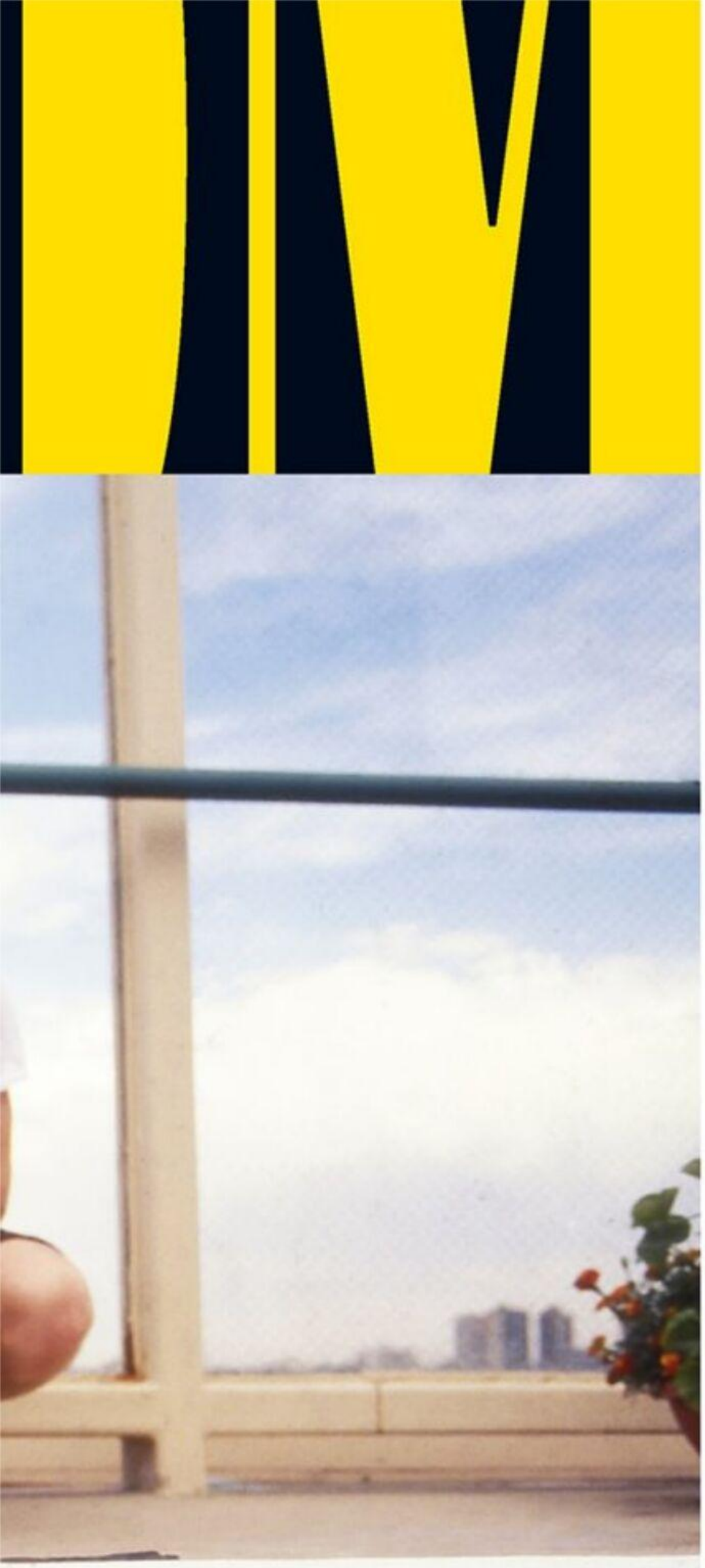
CHAPTER 8

COME AS YOU ARE

What happened to the key people in Nirvana's universe after 1994?

Dave Grohl in London in 1994.

Grohl (foreground) with his band Foo Fighters in Denver in 1996.



CHAPTER 8

S R.E.M. frontman and Kurt Cobain confidante Michael Stipe once sang, "It's easier to leave than to be left behind." When Cobain committed suicide in 1994, he not only left millions of grieving fans, but he also left Dave Grohl, Krist Novoselic and Courtney Love to pick up the pieces and move on with their lives.

It was during Nirvana's final recording session—the one which yielded "You Know You're Right"—that Grohl started working up demos on a handful of songs he had written for himself. After Cobain passed away, he got to work more earnestly on those tunes, putting together a demo that acted both as a way of dealing with his friend's death and as a step into whatever came next. He titled the demo *Foo Fighters* in an effort to keep it as anonymous as possible. Eventually, he put together an album on which he played most every note himself .(Afghan Whigs frontman Greg Dulli contributed one guitar solo.) In July 1995 he released the self-titled debut album by his new band, named after that demo.

For the subsequent tour, he filled out the group's ranks with former Nirvana guitarist Pat Smear, Nate Mendel and William Goldsmith, who represented the rhythm section of a Seattle-based emo band called Sunny Day Real Estate. MTV

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embraced them immediately and their singles became staples on modern rock radio. Since that auspicious debut, Foo Fighters have released 10 more albums, filled stadiums, hosted festivals, won countless awards and gone platinum dozens of times over. They've become one of the last reliable rock stalwarts—incredibly, Foo Fighters have now been a band longer than Kurt Cobain was alive.

Grohl became the massive international rock star that Cobain had been unwilling to be. But Novoselic, who was there with Cobain from the start, chose a quieter life. In addition to doing the bulk of the curation for posthumous Nirvana releases, he's also been involved in a handful of low-stakes music projects, including a genre-hopping collaboration with singer Yva Las Vegass called *Sweet 75*, and a Crazy Horse–esque supergroup alongside Curt Kirkwood from the Meat Puppets and Sublime's Bud Gaugh called Eyes Adrift. Most recently, he's been working with fellow grunge era survivor Kim Thayil (a founding member of Soundgarden, another band made defunct by its frontman's suicide—in this case Chris Cornell) and Pearl Jam drummer Matt Cameron on a group called 3rd Secret.

Novoselic has also made noise as a political activist, working for causes both local and national. In 2004, he published *Of Grunge and Government: Let's Fix This Broken Democracy!*, a manifesto that primarily laid out his ideas about electoral reform.

Nobody endured the impact of Cobain's death more than his widow, Courtney Love. Her band, Hole, released their watershed album *Live Through This* only a few days after her husband's body had been discovered, and it plays like the stages of grief set to music even though it had been recorded months earlier. *Live Through This* is an aggressive and emotionally raw album, but like Cobain's best work it combined a jagged punk spirit with just a touch of pop sweetness. It was a hit and turned Love into a celebrity in her own right, though she couldn't shake the specter of death: Two months after *Live Through This* hit store shelves, Hole bassist Kristen Pfaff died of a drug overdose. Since then, Love's professional life has been mercurial, sometimes focused on music, other times on acting (she's exquisite in her two collaborations with director Milos Forman: 1996's *The People Vs. Larry Flynt* and 1999's *Man on the Moon*).

As for the other key participants that played such a vital role in Nirvana's story—the fans—they regrouped, recovered from the tragedy, and grew up. But they never forgot the band that made them dare to feel. The proof is how they react whenever a Nirvana song is played today.

Though their sound helped define the early '90s, nothing about Nirvana feels dated. The songs are still bracing, the aesthetics still progressive and weird. T-shirts featuring images associated with the band never went out of circulation—they essentially moved comfortably into classic

Krist Novoselic at a rally for presidential candidate John Kerry in 2004 (left).

Frances Bean Cobain (below, left) and Courtney Love in 2016.

From left: Pat Smear, St. Vincent and Novoselic at Nirvana's Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction in 2014.

Grohl (left) and Novoselic together in Hollywood on Jan. 31, 2013.

rock territory. Artists from all over the musical spectrum continue to pay homage to Cobain and Nirvana's legacy—some less obvious than others. You can hear the quiet-loud dynamic and spleen-bursting angst in all of the best Olivia Rodrigo songs, and in 2013 the members of Nirvana ended up with a writing credit on a Jay-Z song when he sampled "Smells Like Teen Spirit" on his album *Magna Carta...Holy Grail*. Hip-hop polyglot Tyler, the Creator and world-beating rapper Drake have both cited Cobain as an inspiration. Nirvana songs have been covered by Evanescence, Patti Smith, Steve Earle, Herbie Hancock and Sinead O'Connor.

Most important, Cobain lives on not as a tale of rock 'n' roll tragedy, but instead as a beacon of ingenuity and integrity. Nirvana may have been unwilling poster boys for grunge, but they were actually the biggest punk band ever. Their music and message are indestructible—a gift to anyone working to figure out the often conflicting voices we all hear in our heads. "We remember Kurt for what he was: caring, generous and sweet," Novoselic said at Cobain's public memorial. "Let's keep the music with us. We'll always have it—forever."

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